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ABSTRACT

This speech presents the ten commandments of communicating educational information to school district patrons. When dealing with parents' and citizens' groups, an administrator should (1) keep no secrets, (2) be honest, (3) have a planned information program, (4) communicate with all publics, (5) respond to other groups' needs as well as his own, (6) use a variety of media and approaches, (7) speak and write in simple English, (8) listen as well as speak, (9) remember the children and keep them first, and (10) consider an information program a necessity. (RA)

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Kenneth K. Muir, presentation to
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COMMUNICATIONS: WHERE SCHOOLS GO WRONG

Title Slide

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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The ways that schools go wrong are almost too numerous to mention. And I won't try, except to say that they range all the way from the naive assumption that anyone can communicate clearly, to the erroneous belief that putting some words down on paper will automatically reach everyone we want to, and that everyone will have a clear idea of what we said.

Presumably, we'd all be much better at the art of living with our fellow man if we did a better job of following the ten commandments. It's pretty hard to fault those basic precepts, but also pretty hard to live up to them. It's easier to go through life in less rigorous ways, and we're good at rationalizing why we do.

TEN COMMANDMENTS of Communication

The same is true with communicating educational information to the patrons of our school districts. There are some basic concepts of communication which, like the Ten Commandments, if we followed, our efforts would turn out better. I'd like to suggest for you today Ten Commandments of Communication and say a few words about each.

#1 Thou Shalt Keep No Secrets

The first commandment is THOU SHALT KEEP NO SECRETS. The name of the outfit I work for helps me to remember this commandment. The Montgomery County Public Schools. Those four words identify the name of the business--schools;

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the location--Montgomery County; and finally, in that last word--Public--the type of audience served and the name of the owner.

Since the public pays my salary and is responsible under the law for setting the goals and policies for the organization, I think they have a right to know just about everything I know about their business. Since not every bureaucrat, board of education and school official has held this viewpoint, however, some states have passed Public Information laws and "sunshine" laws to try to insure that public business is, in fact, public.

I don't think we should need any outside urging. I think it's to our very selfish benefit, unless we're engaged in something dishonest or working against the public interest, to be very open and candid with anyone who asks for information about the public schools.

Bd of Ed Policy Manual

Every Board of Education should have a policy that states clearly the very few areas that should remain confidential, and that states equally clearly that everything else is public information.

Information Policy Statement

The Montgomery County Board of Education policy says that except for personal information about staff and students, and steps in land acquisition, everything else is public business. The state school law also permits labor negoti-

ations to be carried on confidentially.

Two questions to ask

When people call my office to ask about something, I mentally ask myself two questions: Is there any compelling reason why they shouldn't have access to this information, and secondly, if they asked the superintendent, what would he say? If you happen to be the superintendent, ask yourself--if the caller took the issue to court, could I defend a no answer and win?

#2 Thou Shalt Be Honest

The second commandment is THOU SHALT BE HONEST. How is this different from keeping secrets: To me, keeping no secrets has mostly to do with giving people access to things on paper--minutes, memos, reports, bills, and so on. Honesty, I think, has more to do with verbal and written statements that can always be counted upon to be accurate.

Being a little dishonest is like being a little pregnant.

There are a lot of models of dishonesty all around us. Much advertising is at best misleading, if not downright dishonest. Some politicians, some colleagues and some parents in our school district are not honest in all of their verbal and written statements. But, in my view, the two people in a community who can't afford to be less than honest--if credibility with the public, press, and staff is to be maintained--are the superintendent and the public information officer.

Honesty + Forthrightness + Accuracy + Availability = Credibility

By being honest, I don't mean that you have to tell everybody everything you know about every subject, but I do mean that you cannot ever intentionally afford to mislead someone; ever knowingly to give incorrect information. The appearance of honesty is just as important as being honest. The newspaper article that attributes a "no comment" to the superintendent immediately leads people to believe he is hiding something. Being "unavailable for comment" is just as bad.

Secrecy + Evasiveness = Trouble

A school official can never appear to be evasive. If you can't answer a question for some valid reason, explain why. Be forthright, even if it's to explain why you can't give the information requested.

For example, most school systems won't reveal the names of candidates for jobs, but some jobs--like superintendent, human relations director, and a few others--create public and news media interest. You can provide a good, complete story and get in some comments about your goals and desire for quality staff if you give full details bout the process of making the decision. While the news media may hope to get the names of applicants, they will be happy to get a good "process" story which will also help take the pressure off you.

#3 Thou Shalt Have a Planned Information Program

Commandment number three is THOU SHALT HAVE A PLANNED INFORMATION PROGRAM.

Combination of MCPS Pubs

Every school district has some means for providing information. Whether it's just a newspaper report of the Board of Education meeting or a whole flood of documents, every district provides some information to the public.

o Plan a Comm. Program
o Give someone the job...

Every school district should do two things about its information output--plan a program of communication, and give someone responsibility for that program.

Information Objectives

- o Pinpoint & Publish the positive.
- o Predict & Prepare for Problems.

An information plan ought to have two basic objectives. The first is to pinpoint and publicize those positive things that will bring educational improvement, greater economy, or otherwise reflect favorably on the district and its administration. The second objective is to look ahead to anticipate trouble spots or potential controversies and be ready for these with a positive information program before they ripen into crises.

An information plan is something the superintendent ought to have a hand in mapping out; and the plan should be agreed upon in June so you can use the summer to get a running start on the next school year. The plan should be a week-by-week or project-by-project schedule for planning, producing,

distributing and evaluating everything you have decided will be needed.

Implementation:
- o week by week sked
- o one person respons.
- o pick the right person
- o access to the boss

The greatest plan in the world is no good unless someone implements it. In most cases, the superintendent won't have time, even if he happens to have the expertise. Depending upon the size of the district and the budget for information, that someone might range from a teacher who has a period of released time each day, to an experienced, full-time information officer with a supporting staff.

Typically, most school information people come either from the ranks of school personnel (and they learn something about communication) or people from the news media or communication fields (and they learn something about education). I would, of course, recommend a full-time professional person; but whoever it is, give him easy access to the superintendent.

#4 Thou Shalt Communicate with all thy Publics

The next commandment is THOU SHALT COMMUNICATE WITH ALL THY PUBLICS.

Now that we have a plan of information mapped out and a person responsible for the program, we must consider who we are going to inform about what. This really is part of the work that has to go into drawing up your information plan in the first place.

Who Are The Publics?
- o Bd of Ed
- o Central Staff
- o School staffs
- o Elected officials
- o Civic leaders
- o Service Groups
- o PTA officers
- o Students
- o Parents
- o Others

Who are some of the publics that the superintendent needs to inform? There's the Board of Education, the central office staff, the school-based staff, elected community officials, leaders of civic and service groups, PTA officers, students, parents, and other citizens who do not have direct affiliations with schools. Each of these publics has a somewhat different interest in school affairs.

As an example, let's consider the information efforts that might be connected with reaching agreement with the teachers' association on a new contract. The Board doesn't need to be considered as a public in this case since it has been involved right along with the negotiations and decision-making. The central office and school-based staff are the ones most vitally concerned. Many of these people will want to read every word in the agreement because it affects their working conditions and salary. Elected community officials, especially if they have to pass on the school budget and be responsible for raising taxes, will want to know what it costs and what efficiencies or economies can be used to justify the cost. Leaders of civic and service groups may have an interest similar to that of the elected officials. PTA officers and parents and students will be interested in knowing how the contract will improve the student learning opportunities. Many citizens who have no

children in school will want to know how much their property taxes will be going up and any added benefits from the high cost of public education.

Negotiations PR: 3

Packages.
- o Print contract
- o Press release (Impr)
- oPress release (cost)

No single news source will meet the needs of all these publics for information about the contract. Several audiences with common interests can be grouped together, but you need to provide information on this event in at least three different packages: (1) Print the entire contract for employees and others who have an interest in detail, (2) provide a press release that details all the significant improvements, economies, or efficiencies that were agreed upon, and (3) provide another press release that highlights the most important items, estimates the cost of implementation, and translates this into possible increases in tax rates. While some people could ferret out most of the information they want from the printed contract, most won't want to work that hard to get it. Also, it would be a waste to print that many copies. The press release method also provides an opportunity for the superintendent and Board to explain and justify reasons for their decisions.

Headlines with "slurs"

Many people overlook the importance of this last point. I know of no school official or board member who intentionally does rash or stupid things. Yet, newspaper reports, gossip, or actual campaigns to defeat a project can make it appear

that they have. The problem usually is that the superintendent and Board didn't create enough opportunities to explain the factors and rationale that led up to their decision. If those factors and rationale were convincing to the Board in the first place, they probably would be convincing to a majority of the citizens--if only they understood them.

#5 Thou Shalt Respond to Their Needs as well as Thine Own

The fifth commandment is THOU SHALT RESPOND TO THEIR NEEDS AS WELL AS THINE OWN.

We've just used an example to show the need to tailor messages to the various publics or audiences that each of us has. Our example was a piece of information that the superintendent and Board wants to communicate--if not they, then at least the local teachers' organization. In this case we had a desire to communicate with others about something that was important to us.

One Step Beyond
- o who is interested?
- o what's the best way..
- o how will this help...
  - --Quash rumors
  - --Defuse
  - --Credibility

But, we must go a step further. We also have to anticipate and meet squarely the desire for information that certain of our audiences may have. For instance, if there is a student disorder in a school, a lot of people will want and need information about it.

The first inclination of a superintendent may be to ignore or minimize this topic because it reflects unfavorably on the district. It just isn't good form to have student disorders.

9 On the other hand, prompt, clear, and full communication

about the events surrounding a disorder and what is being done about it can quash rumors, defuse possible agitation that might carry over to other schools, and give good evidence of the school administration's ability to handle touchy situations. You never should depend on newspaper accounts to inform your staff, students, or most interested and active parents. They need more information than this, and you'd be surprised how many people don't read the paper, anyway.

Examples of bad newsletters

Some staff newsletters are full of stories about retirements, promotions, the excellence of the school lunch program, and pictures of the superintendent and board members making presentations. This type of newsletter is worse than useless-it actually harms the superintendent's credibility with his staff because they know some of what is going on and will resent being fed the irrelevant pap that is contained in that type of staff newsletter.

MCPS pubs with good, meaty heads

If there is a big community controversy about grading and we never mention the subject in our community newsletter, we are not responding to the need of the public to know what it's all about, nor are we taking the opportunity to present our views and win support for your position. A communication device must be relevant to the needs of its audience or it won't communicate. We have to make it

convenient for people to get information, put it in terms they can understand, and deal with the things they want to know about.

#6 Thou Shalt Use a Variety of Media and Approaches

Commandment number six is THOU SHALT USE A VARIETY OF MEDIA AND APPROACHES. If we are going to make it convenient for people to get information, we have to know something about their habits. We can find this out through a public opinion survey or we can ask a lot of questions of all types of people that we meet. The most basic questions to ask are: Where do you get most of your information about schools now; do you get enough; and if not, what source would be most convenient to get more information.

Last Bulletin & Learning questionnaire

Don't overlook your employees as a community news source. Everyone who knows someone who works for the school board will consider him a source of good information about schools--and whether or not they are depends upon how much accurate and complete information we provide them.

TV Screen

Television is rated highest as people's source of news, but unless you're in an unusually favorable position, it's tough to get prime TV time and news space for school stories. But, just because you don't get much from them is no reason to keep them in the dark. Make sure they get all of your news releases and background information.

Tips to Editors

Newspapers are the source that most people think of first, so I won't dwell on this medium. We've found that looking ahead to events in the future, giving plenty of advance notice, encouraging coverage by personal calls and good background information, and always being available to reporters when they call, can produce good feature and news results.

KKM on the horn

The telephone is often overlooked as a good news source. Every school district ought to have someone responsible for public information, and that person's telephone number should be well publicized so that citizens, students, and staff can call to get information. An investment of $25 per month can get you a telephone answering device on which you can record two or three minutes of news at the end of the day, and this will respond to citizens' need for information during the 16 hours the office is closed. We publicize the number of the news phone widely and regularly so that anyone can call. Several radio stations have their tape listen to our tape, and I frequently run into people who say, "I heard you on the radio this morning."

PTA pubs

PTA or civic association newsletters, shoppers, envelope stuffers, banks, barbershops, public libraries and thousands of other outlets exist for school information--and they're all free. The PTA newsletter is one of the best school to

community communications devices, and while the principal shouldn't control or censor that newsletter, we've found that most newsletter editors are happy to publicize future board meeting agendas, reports that have been issued, and other school events of importance to the community.

List of pubs schools should produce

In wrapping up the print media, a school district must have its own publications, because in the final analysis, these are the only ones that it can absolutely control. Every district, no matter how small, should have a staff newsletter; it should also have an informative annual report--not just a collection of statistics and balance sheets--that is mailed to every taxpayer. There are a number of other types of communications that are desirable and reasonably inexpensive. A mimeographed parent newsletter, sent home with the youngest child in the family can be an excellent and inexpensive communicator--even if the delivery system isn't always foolproof.

HOE & public

Last, but perhaps foremost, don't overlook the value of face-to-face communication. Every superintendent and information officer, as well as other top school officials, should continually be on the lookout for opportunities to make personal appearances at civic and service groups, citizen forums, PTA meetings--anywhere you have a chance to get your message to the public.

#7 Thou Shalt Speak and Write in Simple English

The seventh commandment is THOU SHALT SPEAK AND WRITE IN SIMPLE ENGLISH.

I won't spend much time on this because I couldn't begin to enumerate the number of educational communications that are written in such passive, obtuse and dull pedagese that no one except the author could be expected to read it.

To Better Meet the Educational needs of the students + to teach better.

The one skill that every educational communicator needs first and foremost is the ability to edit his own and others' prose.

How to Be Understood
- o keep it short
- o make it snappy
- o write for 7th grade
- o don't try to impress

First, it should be as short as possible, containing everything essential, but in the briefest possible terms. Remember, we're competing for a person's time, and our topic is only one of thousands of pieces of information that other communicators--some of them much more expert than we--are trying to get audience attention.

Second--the language should be active, not passive.

Third--write as if the audience were a bunch of seventh grade students. If it's too complicated for them, we'll have gone over the heads of many of our readers.

Fourth--don't try to impress your readers with your erudition. They assume we're well educated or we wouldn't have the position we do.

#8 Thou Shalt Listen as Well as Speak

Commandment number eight is THOU SHALT LISTEN AS WELL AS SPEAK.

There are three points to remember here.

Try to Understand

First, keep an open ear and an open mind to criticism and comment. Remember we mentioned staff and community newsletters as part of the commentary on commandment number five. If we're going to deal with the things that are important to our audiences, it is important to heed and try to understand criticisms of the school district. Then try to deal with these in a constructive, responsive, and non-defensive way.

Work to obtain feedback

Second, every school district needs channels for communication input and feedback. An ombudsman, citizen advisory councils, public forums, or a telephone hot line may be ways in which citizens can approach the bureaucracy with reasonable security. In being responsive to things the public brings up in this way, we will come across a lot of items that will provide material for our publications as well as face-to-face contacts.

Evaluate what you've done

The third point pertains to our various communications methods --and it's this--evaluate them from time to time. A staff or a school community newsletter should include a reader survey form once a year to find out what the readers like, don't like, or would like to have that we aren't giving them. If you do radio or TV shows, a listener survey can do the same.

#9 Thou Shalt Remember the Children and Keep Them first

The ninth commandment is THOU SHALT REMEMBER THE CHILDREN AND KEEP THEM FIRST.

Kids on playground

Every communication from the school district--especially those about money--should be related to children. After all, children is why we're in business, and improvements for the children are the reason why citizens are willing to pay more and more taxes to support public education.

Kids in classroom

If we're talking about the need for additional funds, we must make sure those needs are primarily related to improved education for kids. No one gives a damn whether our professional ratio is 56 or 50 per 1,000, but they will care a good bit about the size of their kid's class and the opportunities for individualized instruction.

Drug Education slide

There's a tendency to talk about what's new and different--urban studies, ecology, sex education, and so forth, and to ignore read'ng, 'riting, 'rithmetic, and some of these other regular subjects.

Heads on reading & math

People are concerned about the basics and we'd better let them know from time to time that we're still teaching them, and that they're still important to us.

Bulletin feature (pix)

In community and staff newsletters and news releases, make

sure that classroom programs are highlighted here, too. In our system, we believe that one of the best ways to spread good instructional practices is not through research reports, meetings of subject supervisors, or inservice workshops, but through feature articles in our various newsletters. And, it works too. Use pictures of kids and teachers whenever possible, because whatever else the schools may be doing, this is still their main reason for being, the main reason the public is willing to pay, and human interest will always get reader attention.

#10 Thou Shalt Not Consider Thy Information Program a Frill

Our tenth and last commandment is the only negative one--THOU SHALT NOT CONSIDER THY INFORMATION PROGRAM A FRILL.

When the pressure is on and budgets are tight, there's always a tendency to look around for a few frills to cut. Information isn't one of these. As long as you still have an accountant, and an instructional supervisor, you should still have a person responsible for your information program. You might cut back on your staff if things are really tough, but no matter how tight the budget is, you still have to communicate; and more than ever, you need to gain better public understanding of your program.

Old Chinese Proverb: Don't cut off nose to spite face

If your information officer has really been concerned with telling it like it is--rather than playing press agent for the superintendent--if he has publications that meet a public need, rather than just the Board's need for favorable publicity, then you will still have credibility with your public and you won't hear many demands for doing away with the information function.

Information is the key to credibility and support

The harder the times are, the more you need a good information program.